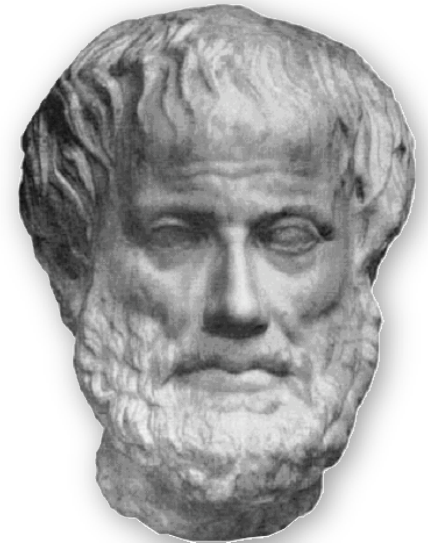


# ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

## An Overview and Summary

### The Highest Human Good...

- » The principal idea with which Aristotle begins is that there are differences of opinion about *what is best for human beings*, and that to profit from ethical inquiry we must resolve this disagreement.
- » Aristotle's search for *the human good* is a search for *the highest good*, and he assumes that the highest good, whatever it turns out to be, has three characteristics: it is *desirable for itself*, it is *not desirable for the sake of some other good*, and *all other goods are desirable for its sake*.
- » Aristotle thinks everyone will agree that the terms *eudaimonia* (“happiness”) and *eu zên* (“living well”) designate such an end. The Greek term “*eudaimon*” is composed of two parts: “*eu*” means “*well*” and “*daimon*” means “*divinity*” or “*spirit*” To be *eudaimon* is therefore to be living in a way that is well-favored by a god... or more simply to be “*living well*”
- » No one tries to live well for the sake of some further goal; rather, being *eudaimon* is the highest end, and all subordinate goals—health, wealth, and other such resources—are sought because they promote well-being, not because they are what well-being consists in. ***But unless we can determine which good or goods happiness consists in, it is of little use to acknowledge that it is the highest end.***

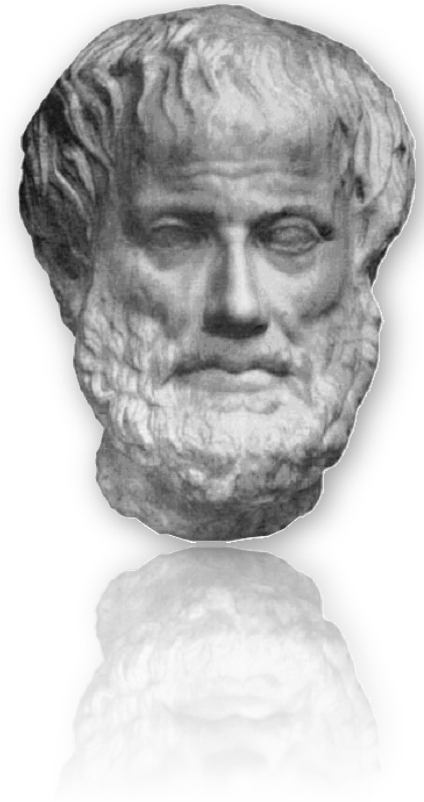


# ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

## An Overview and Summary

### The Function Argument...

- » To resolve this issue, Aristotle asks what the *ergon* (“function,” “task,” “work”) of a human being is, and argues that it consists *in activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue* (1097b22-1098a20)
- » The good of a human being must have something to do with *being human*; and what Aristotle thinks sets humanity off from other species, giving us the potential to live a better life, is *our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason*.
- » So, if we use reason well, then we live well as human beings. Or, more specifically, using reason well *over the course of a full life is what happiness consists in*.
- » But doing anything well requires *virtue or excellence*, and therefore living well consists in *activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence*.
- » Note that Aristotle does not say that *happiness is virtue*, but rather that it is *virtuous activity*. In other words, living well consists in *doing something*, not just being in a certain state or condition. *It consists in those lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul*.
- » What does it mean to actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul?

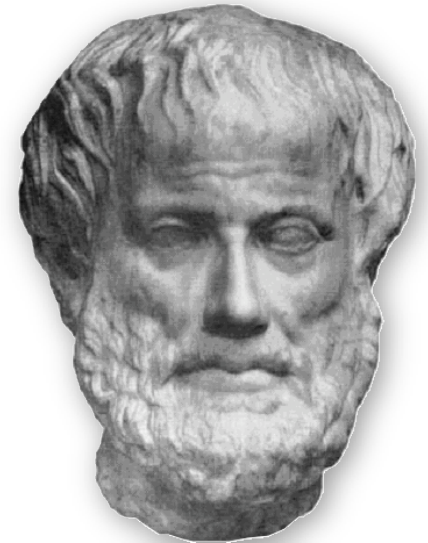


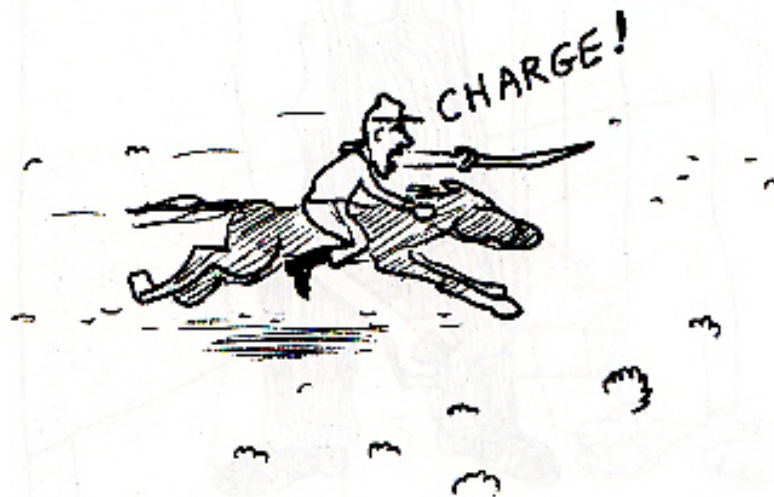
# ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

## An Overview and Summary

### Virtue and the Doctrine of the Mean...

- » According to Aristotle, “Virtue, then, is *a state that decides, consisting in a mean*, the mean *relative to us*, which is *defined by reference to reason*, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which *the prudent person would define it*. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.” (1107a1-4)
- » Aristotle describes ethical virtue as a *hexis* (“state” “condition” “disposition”)—a *tendency or disposition*, induced by *our habits*, to have *appropriate feelings* (1105b25-6)
- » Furthermore, every ethical virtue is *a condition intermediate between two other states*, one involving *excess*, and the other *deficiency* (1106a26-b28).
- » In this respect, Aristotle says, the virtues are no different from technical skills in the sense that every skilled worker knows how to avoid excess and deficiency, and is in a condition intermediate between two extremes.
- » The courageous person, for example, judges that some dangers are worth facing and others not, and experiences fear to a degree that is appropriate to his circumstances. *He lies between the coward, who flees every danger and experiences excessive fear, and the rash person, who judges every danger worth facing and experiences little or no fear.*





# ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

## An Overview and Summary

### Virtue and the Doctrine of the Mean...

- » The “mean is relative”... In other words, Aristotle is careful to add, that the mean is to be determined in a way that takes into account the particular circumstances of the individual (1106a36-b7).
- » The arithmetic mean between 10 and 2 is 6, and this is so invariably, whatever is being counted. But the intermediate point that is chosen by an expert in any of the crafts will vary from one situation to another.
- » There is no universal rule, for example, about how much food an athlete should eat, and it would be absurd to infer from the fact that 10 lbs. is too much and 2 lbs. too little for me that I should eat 6 lbs.
- » Finding the mean in any given situation is not a mechanical or thoughtless procedure, but requires a full and detailed acquaintance with the circumstances.
- » *So becoming virtuous (and thus being happy) is like learning how to do something – building a house or playing the harp. You can only learn by doing.*

